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Main plot, parallel or episodic plotline? Storyline A, B or C? The question of plots in serial narratives

Introduction

Contemporary serial productions are typified by a novel paradigm of storytelling. In defining the characteristics of mass-produced series in the new millennium, American media scholar Jason Mittell mentions, e.g. spectacular storytelling style, more profound psychology of the characters, multi-level dramatic structures, unexpected twists that imply faster storytelling pace or manipulation of discourse time (Mittell, 2015, pp. 18–47). However, the main change he identifies in the storytelling paradigm is plot continuity across individual episodes (Mittell, 2015, pp. 26, 44), arguing that the new type of serialised storytelling "redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration – not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance." (Mittell, 2011, p. 159). When discussing the "shifting balance", Mittell recognises a different kind of hierarchy of individual plotlines in serials. While procedural (episodic) series are characterised by the dominant role of self--contained plotlines, contemporary authors take advantage of continuing plotlines spanning the entire season. This, of course, compels a number of changes in the serial narrative, but the declarative innovation of the new storytelling formula is pursued within individual plotlines, which are successively developed throughout the season or even the entire series.

The peculiar narrative modality devised by the creators of neo-serials – resulting from a combination of traits in feature films, long-running productions and episodic series – requires one to redefine the employed notions as well as introduce additional scholarly terms to replace the widely used ones. Neo-serials constitute a new area for research, and while the traditional shows have been

dedicated to numerous reputable studies, there is a noticeable lack of specialised terms that could be applied to analyse formal aspects of such narratives or particular genre features. Concepts deriving from literature or film are often too archaic to describe multi-plotline compositions comprehensively enough.

The current study focuses on the multiplicity of plotlines in newly emerging serial narration. It reviews and redefines the existing nomenclature related to plotlines while taking into account the characteristics of the new storytelling paradigm. Furthermore, a new term, "catalytic plotline", is proposed to enable a more complete and hierarchical organisation of plotlines in contemporary serialised structures.

"Wątek [plotline]" versus storyline

The plotline "occupies an intermediate position in the hierarchy of morphological units between an event (an elementary dynamic motif)[1] and the entire plot of a work."[2] As the essential components of a plot – and the building blocks of particular plotlines – events (happenings) are relatively simple to define, and despite the evolution of serial structures, no significant change has occurred in this respect. According to Seymour Chatman, events "are either actions, i.e. events in which a being (character or object) does something, or events, consisting in something happening to a being" (Chatman, 1984, p. 215). Speaking of events in the context of feature filmmaking, Mirosław Przylipiak observes that they "take place within a definite unit of time and in a specific place (unity of place and time), and are characterised by the difference between the initial and the final state of affairs" (Przylipiak, 2016, p. 60).

Plotlines are the next morphological units in the systematics of the plot layer in a film.[3] *Słownik filmu* defines them as "causally related motifs, whose arrangement constitutes a line which integrates events across a timeline" (Syska, 2010, p. 59). In the literary definition, plotlines are "plot events centred around a single character or a couple of characters separated from the entire group of the represented persons due to the type of relationship between them (e.g. a love plotline telling the story of two protagonists)" (Sławiński, 1998, p. 608).

It follows from the above that in order for something to be called a plotline, two elements must be in evidence:
• events that form a logical cause-and-effect sequence over a certain timeline,
• a character or group of characters around whom the events are centred.

The teleological aspect of a serial or film narrative should also be considered. Each plotline has an assigned character (or group of characters) who pursues

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[1] Motifs are basic units of action that depict events; motifs may be dynamic (containing events/acts which are relevant to the development of the action) and static (delineating a character or expanding the background of the action, slowing its development).

[2] http://teoria-literatury.cba.pl/index.php/motyw-watek-osnowa-fabula/ [10.06.2023].

[3] In Polish literature "wątek [plotline]" is also referred to as "fabuła [plot]".

a goal or seeks to fulfil a desire.[4] Various antagonistic forces impede the achievement of the intended goal, based on which conflicts arise. Whether the plotline relies on relationships or involves intensification of character actions or spectacular unfolding of the story, the teleological pattern is inscribed into the structure of the plot. Admittedly, Jacek Ostaszewski associates the teleology of action with classical cinema, arguing that its protagonist was "characterised by activity and striving to achieve the goals set out in the complication in the first act" (Ostaszewski, 2021, p. 89), but the storytelling in contemporary serial narratives is more dynamic than in film productions. One of the leading Polish producers of such series, Maciej Kubicki[5], emphasises that in modern-day shows the "density of storytelling" is much greater than in feature films (Kubicki, 2017). To accomplish such an effect, characters must be oriented towards a clearly outlined goal, which implies the occurrence of numerous conflicts that render the course of individual plotlines more dynamic. Thus, the definition of individual plotlines in the context of contemporary series should be expanded to include the notion of goal-orientation of characters.

A separate issue is the nomenclature and terms which are considered synonymous with "wątek [plotline]". The most immediate English equivalent is the "thread", which is seldom used in pertinent literature in that language (especially in American authors), where the word "line" is most often used in various phraseological configurations, including storylines, plotlines, narrative lines or dramatic lines. The latter terms may have different meanings depending on the context. Referring to the episodic nature of a series, Graeme Turner opted for the term "plotlines", but in cases where the story does not conclude within an episode, the term "continuing storylines" was used (Turner, 2008, p. 8). In her analysis of the development of contemporary serialised forms, Kristin Thompson (2003, p. 31) speaks of the principal or leading "storyline", whereas "plotlines" serve her to describe supporting, ancillary stories. The term "serial plots" is employed by Mittell (2015, p. 25) to refer to major or most important themes of the story. It would follow that using the terms "storyline" and "plotline" synonymously is acceptable. The word "storyline" in its abbreviated form, i.e. "story", appears in most writings in the field, whereby it is indicated that the main one is "story A" while complementary plotlines are "story B, C, D", etc. Television screenwriter Evan S. Smith (1999, pp. 93-94) is one of the few to use the term "threads", noting "that some series may feature four to five story threads."

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[4] In certain film currents trends or art cinema in the broad sense, filmmakers may deliberately avoid including the teleological aspect into the plot. For instance, David Bordwell observes that cinematic modernism "can play down characters' casual projects, keep silent about their motives, emphasise 'insignificant actions' and intervals, and never reveal effects of actions" (Bordwell, 1987). *Narration in the Fiction Film*. London and New York: Taylor & Francis, p. 206.

[5] Co-owner of Telemark, the studio which has produced series such as *Londyńczycy*, *Bez tajemnic*, *Pakt*, *Nielegalni*, *Wielka woda*, *Krakowskie potwory*.

Multiple plotlines: film versus series

Fictional narratives can involve one or multiple plotlines, though stories of the former type are not generally used in commercial filmmaking. Single plotlines may be found in studies, short films, and, less frequently, medium-length features. Most often, the makers of medium-length and feature-length works use at least two-plotline structures, although in some niche currents of art cinema, such as neo-modernism, the entire narrative may be built around a single plotline (Syska, 2013, p. 102).

Regardless of the number of plotlines, the dominant plot structure in cinema relies on single-focus narratives exploring the main plotline, while all subplots play an inferior role: "They mostly tell stories about relationships and relations", highlighting the main story, "lending it the right colour" (Schütte, 2015, p. 83). David Bordwell (1987, p. 157) underlines that classic Hollywood cinema, which established formal standards for other filmmakers, operates using only two plotlines. The first main plotline contains a clearly delineated vector of action for the protagonist, while the second portrays the protagonist's emotional relationships and enhances the characters, consequently intensifying the emotional response in the audience. Such a formula, Ostaszewski (2021, p. 91) observes, goes beyond the classical cinema as well. As an example, the author cites *Ida* (2013, dir. Paweł Pawlikowski), where as part of the main plotline, Anna (Agata Trzebuchowska) – the protagonist – discovers her roots. The subplot depicts a brief love relationship between Anna and a saxophone player she meets by chance (Dawid Ogrodnik).

In the context of feature films, Linda Aronson (2019, pp. 102–103) introduces her own terminology, speaking of the relationship line and the action line, also distinguishing the subplot (concerning relationships) and the main plot. Similarly, Tomasz Kłys (2009, p. 191) mentions the presence of two action lines (sensational and amorous) when discussing *Casablanca*. As Edward Branigan (1999, p. 143) argues, this type of narrative strategy "provides the spectator with more ways to imagine causal connections and more opportunities for the overall story to advance." Naturally, the two-plotline dictate is not the rule but merely the predominant mode of storytelling that most films employ. Sometimes, the length of films forces filmmakers to introduce additional plotlines (as in the pictures by Martin Scorsese). Elsewhere, it may stem from the strategy of shaping the narrative, which features a lavish amount of plotlines specifically to spotlight an issue or message from multiple perspectives (e.g. *Snatch*, dir. Guy Ritchie, 2000). Regardless of whether filmmakers build stories based on two plots – as in classic Hollywood – or expand the story vertically, it is the main plot that "centralises" all events.

A separate category comprises plots which are not subject to the single-focus narrative paradigm but instead consist of so-called parallel plotlines: e.g. *Short Cuts* (dir. Robert Altman, 1993) or *Magnolia* (dir. Paul T. Anderson, 1999). Linda Aronson (2019, pp. 203–380) provides a detailed division of multi-plotline narratives in the textbook *The 21st Century Screenplay*, but she stresses that the explication of a single, primary plotline is the dominant form of narration

in the film. Thus, distinguishing individual plotlines in feature films requires identification of the main plot and its correlated side plots or, in the latter (less widespread) case, a network of parallel plotlines. Of course, mutations and combinations of such arrangements are also noticeable, but this may prove a dramaturgic error if, next to the main narrative, the filmmakers introduce parallel plotlines which are disconnected from the main plot.

The situation is different with serialised narratives. Multiple plotlines are one of the criteria which distinguish small-screen productions from feature films. Contemporary serial productions are multi-plotline structures in which the varied hierarchies of plots combine continuity and episodicity (Borowiecki, 2019, pp. 163–171). Such an array undermines the possibility of using a uniform set of definitions of plots in serial and film narratives alike.

The question used to be irrelevant in the past millennium, when, in terms of the multi-plotline arrangement, one could speak of two forms: continuing (classified as a series), including, e.g. soap operas and miniseries, and episodic, where individual plotlines concluded with the end of an episode: anthologies, episodic serials (series), sitcoms.

In the first of the above forms, there are several (up to over a dozen) parallel narratives which are successively unfolded over the next episodes. The second type of narrative does not exceed four plotlines (Kallas, 2014), designated respectively (storyline A, B, C, D).[6] Storyline A denotes the plotline which informs the main story of an episode. The complementary stories (storylines B, C, D) may be correlated with the episode's main plot or merely fit freely into the overall story. The imposed plotline restriction was due to the perceptual capacity of the audience, which had been determined as a maximum of four different stories per episode (Douglas, 2007, p. 70). The situation changed after the airing of *Hill Street Blues*, in which plotlines from earlier episodes would build up later on in the series. As Boleslaw Racięski (2016, p. 26) notes, that accumulation peaked when the viewers had to follow "as many as 17 plotlines" in one episode.

Today, with the predominance of neo-serials, "in which plots develop over several episodes, sometimes three or four, sometimes as many as ten or twelve" (Holland, 1997, p. 114), the rule of four plotlines that conclude in a particular episode does not apply. Obviously, this does not mean that the creators have completely abandoned the established principles of devising plot structures for series by writing and dividing the content of the episodes into individual stories. A hierarchy of plotlines that the screenwriters operate on is still maintained, but it extends beyond the framework of an episode to span the entire story told in a given season. Even so, despite their continuity, Daniel Calvisi (2016, pp. 32–33) emphasises that the plotlines within an episode are self-contained structures so that the leitmotif (theme) of an episode has a classical division into introduction, development and conclusion, fitting in that shape into the

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[6] Not all creators used four storylines, as the choice was often predicated on the "density" of events within the main plot; for example, certain episodes of *The X-Files* or *Monk* rely solely on story A. See Douglas (2007, p. 72).

progressively unfolding story. Quality series creator and producer Glen Mazzara observes that there are different modes of telling a television story. Contributing to the episodes of the Walking Dead series (AMC, 2010–), he had never before faced a situation where one would depart from the traditional A- B- C story to focus on individual plotlines in the traditional sense. He goes on to state that individual narrative lines are often assigned to specific characters, and it is their stories which remain the backbone around which the development of the plot is organised, but need not be related to the theme of an episode (as in traditional serials). As an example, he mentions *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011–2019), whereby a particular episode may contain some thematically allotted plotline, yet it does not have to (Landau, 2013, p. 178). The author draws attention to a strategy in which, despite story continuity, individual plotlines may constitute (or co-constitute) the theme of a given episode whilst interacting with the plot of that season.

The above variation of serialised forms should be attributed to three factors: the duration of the series, the division of individual plotlines into episodes, and the pace of storytelling known in the industry as story dynamics. The duration (running time) of full features is around 100 minutes, whereas, depending on the number of seasons, multi-season serials span from a dozen or so to several dozen hours (or more). For example, the seven seasons (84 episodes) of the series *Billions* (*Billions*, Showtime, 2016–2023) represent approximately 80 hours of screen time.

The second difference stems from the fact contemporary creators take advantage of a plot model enclosed within episodic structures, introducing a maximum of four plots (the aforementioned stories A, B, C, D). Today, the latter often form the thematic dominant of a particular episode, which is simultaneously integrated into an overall so-called season arc. This is something I choose to call an encounter of tradition and modernity. Despite continuity which, being a permanent feature of serialised narratives for more than two decades, makes serials akin to long films, screenwriters "for programs containing story arcs need to plan the plot structure of both the single episode and the ongoing story as well" (Thompson, 2003, p. 62). This demonstrates that the traditional formula of using episode-specific plotlines has not been abandoned but rather creatively adapted for the requirements of contemporary serialised narratives.

The third factor which causes series to opt for a distinct multi-plotline modality – relative to feature films – is the financing of television networks. In fact, since their inception, the main source of funding has been revenue from advertisers. Consequently, shows – including serials – are interrupted by commercials. Numerous series broadcast by streaming services (Netflix, HBO, Amazon) without commercial breaks were originally commissioned by television networks, which required that dramatic suspense (a so-called "cliffhanger") be used every ten minutes or so of screen time. Today, in spite of a different funding model, series are still being made based on the four- or five-act model that represents the offshoot of plot patterns which developed as early as the

spread of television sets in the early 1950s. In effect, plotlines are approached differently than in feature films, which have never been made with commercial breaks in mind.

Division of plotlines

The most widespread systematisation of plotlines in both literary and film studies distinguishes between main plots and subplots (or incidental plots).[7] According to *Słownik filmowy*, multi-plotline stories "next to the main plot, feature subplots which introduce secondary characters and – along with the latter – additional themes" (Syska, 2010, p. 59). A similar division is asserted in a literary dictionary: "The events that contribute to the fates of the protagonists make up the main plot of the story, which has its secondary subplots, comprising events involving background characters" (Sławinski, 1998, p. 608). In turn, Sierotwiński's *Słownik terminów literackich* (1960, p. 149) states as follows: "The main plot is a plot distinguished by its essential role in the story (…). A subplot is subsidiary to the main plot." It follows that the main plot centres around events associated with the protagonist, while subplots are determined by secondary characters. However, where it concerns those involved in particular plotlines, the above assertion is at odds with the narrative solutions adopted in neo-serials. A number of contemporary productions do not meet the criteria stipulated in the definition. For example, in *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013), the protagonist – regardless of the type of plotline – participates in or even remains the focal element of all events in a given subplot. Simultaneously, drawing on the first seasons of quality serials such as *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008) and *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013–2018), we notice that all characters – including tertiary ones – do take part in the main plot (investigation against a criminal group in the former, and Frank Underwood's [Kevin Spacey] rise to power). Hence, the above definitions cannot be applied to serials without a prior adjustment. On the other hand, the part of the definition in which the authors assert the secondary function of subplots with respect to the main plot is thoroughly legitimate.

In his analysis of multiple plotlines in feature films, German screenwriting theorist Oliver Schütte (2015, p. 84) notes that all subplots "tell their own stories each time, stories which also have a beginning, a middle and an end. A subplot is thus a story within a story." Ostaszewski (2019, p. 106), who discusses the two-plotline model in classical cinema, underlines that in each plotline, "there are goals of the action, vicissitudes as the plot unfolds, and the climax." This definition highlights the significance of subplots since, regardless of their

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[7] In this study, I do not invoke terms such as "accelerating plotline", "delaying plotline" and "transitional plotline" which were popularised by Sierotwiński (1960, p. 149), or Kracauer's "found story" and "embryonic pattern" (Kracauer 2008, pp. 284–285). These terms have not been widely adopted by scholars and serial filmmakers.

hierarchy and close correlation with the main plot, they represent self-contained stories with an independent dramatic structure devised in accordance with storytelling paradigms.

The definitions provided do not address the question of plotline duration, as episodic narration has not been taken into account in either the literary or cinematic domains. Serialisation entails time constraints on individual plots, which may be reduced to the running time of a single episode or several episodes or continue throughout the entire season. It is characteristic of the plotlines that represent the "legacy" of episodic seriality that their duration is limited to one episode. For instance, in Episode 3, Season 1 of *Sons of Anarchy* (FOX, 2008––2014), the central issue is the rape of the daughter of a regional businessman. The protagonists (members of a motorbike gang) find the perpetrators among a travelling circus group and mete out justice themselves. The plotline is not connected to the events of the main narrative line and concludes over the course of one episode.

Thus, episodic plotlines are the shortest compared with other storylines. Subplots and the main plot will have a longer screen time. The former are successively developed over several episodes. The latter will unfold within a season (or series), although it does not necessarily have to feature in each episode of a given instalment. For example, no references to the main plot may be found in Episode 5, Season 1 of *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007), where the screenwriters introduced three episodic plots instead. Such arrangements depend on the compositional scheme adopted for a given serialised production.

To recapitulate the above, it should be assumed that the main plot is characterised by:
• an essential (leading) role in the story (usually the theme of the series),
• events centred around the protagonists,
• the emergence of a core conflict,
• duration: entire season (or, in some cases, the whole series).
    Correspondingly, a subplot is characterised by:
• correlation with the main plot,
• subsidiary (complementary) function in the story (supporting the main plot),
• events revolving around the protagonists (primary characters),
• in most cases concluded over a minimum of two episodes.

It is something of a debatable issue when a series does not have a single, conspicuous, superior (main) plot, such as in *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001–2005), *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007–2015) or *Shameless* (Showtime, 2011–2021). The multi--plotline pattern resembles the structures used in soap operas (leaving the broadly understood dramaturgy of the work aside). This raises a problem since no descriptive tools are available. Since the definition of subplot cannot be used (as the absence of the presumed main plot precludes its application), one should avail oneself of the notion of a parallel plotline. The latter derives from the terminology used in feature films, i.e. parallel narratives. Such devices are referred to when films do not have a single-focus structure based on a main plot, while, e.g. the message or other plot component serves to bring all elements together.

A parallel plotline:
• does not perform a superior function in the plot (i.e. serves as a focal point for other plotlines),
• plays a dominant role in the plot of the series,
• focuses on the primary and secondary characters,
• occurs in most episodes.

In English-language literature (concerned with television series), authors employ a simplified notation to describe the hierarchy of plotlines, whereby different plotlines are referred to as storylines A, B, C, etc. Storyline A denotes the main plot of a serial, while the remainder have a complementary function. According to the definition from an English-language website for serial scriptwriters, "the B story is often more character-driven and more emotional. It contains fewer story beats compared to your A story and has less screen time" (*What are A, B and C Plots…*, online). The next plotline in the hierarchy – storyline C – is the shortest of all. "It's the arc you allocate the fewest beats and the least screen time to. It carries the least weight in your episode and is the least critical to the overall narrative" (*What are A, B and C Plots…*, online). Story D may involve a kind of comedic component that provides a "relief" to the main plot (Douglas, 2007, pp. 71–72).

The term "runner" is sometimes used to emphasise that a given plotline (storyline) does not end with the episode but is successively developed in the subsequent episodes. The colloquially used "continuing plotline" may be argued to be its equivalent in Polish literature. Albeit not very widespread, another term used in the television industry is "subwątek" (or subplot in English), which is defined similarly to the concept of "wątek poboczny [subplot]" in Polish literature. Smith (1999, p. 94) states that subplots are "short, secondary storylines", which is essentially how one refers in the literature to any secondary besides Story A (the main plot).

Episodic and catalytic plotlines

The typology presented above is too general to effectively describe the multi-plotline structures of neo-serials, which, in view of the continuity (causal attribute) maintained throughout the series (or at least one season), are similar to feature cinema but still display affinities with episodic series, i.e. stories told within a single episode. It would, therefore, be legitimate to introduce the term "episodic plotline", which – in the hierarchy of plotlines – constitutes the third type of arrangement of events (leaving parallel plotlines aside) that contemporary filmmakers take advantage of.

According to Zygmunt Łempicki (1926, p. 23), an episodic plotline "appears only by way of embellishment and is only loosely connected with the main plot." In literary and film studies, the word "episode" as such means "relatively independent events which belong to the plot but develop the action of the subplot" (Syska, 2010, p. 59) or, according to a literary dictionary: "Elaborate

plot arrangements, e.g. a novel or an epic, in addition to the events arrayed in plotlines, may include numerous episodes which characterise the background (social, moral, historical, etc.) against which the events take place" (Sławinski, 1998, p. 148). Episodic plotlines (which do not affect the action directly) are elements which, despite their occurrence, exert no or merely a negligible impact on the unfolding of events within the main narrative line.

A term which functions and tends to be frequently used in film studies is episodicity, described by Siegfried Kracauer (who avails himself of a definition from Webster's dictionary) as: "a set of events having distinctness and moment in a larger series" (Kracauer, 2008, p. 290). In post-classical narratives, there is a current of films collectively referred to as episodic (or "network narratives" in Bordwell), in that they consist of numerous parallel plotlines but, unlike in classical cinema, no hierarchy is imposed by "subordinating subplots to the main plot" (Ostaszewski, 2019, p. 229). The idea of episodicity is understood as "events happening by chance" (Ostaszewski, 2019, p. 229).

Within film theory, episodicity – with respect to feature films – may therefore be understood in two ways: as an episodic narrative, where non-hierarchised subplots make up the entire composition (e.g. *Magnoli*a, dir. P.T. Anderson, 1999), or as episodic interjections functioning outside plotlines (or as part of subplots), but serve additional functions, such as supplementing the background of the story or providing explanations within the latter. In both cases, however, the concept of episodic plotline does not apply, as either all plotlines are qualified as subplots (or parallel plotlines) or events are treated as separate episodic interjections. The term "episode" is also employed in the English-language literature to denote episodic series in which the content falls under the paradigm of episodicity: it is a self-contained story within a single episode (Creeber, 2010, pp. 8–9).

The term being suggested has its roots in film episodicity in the sense of being parallel to other plotlines (i.e. it does not directly contribute to the development of the main plot), while at the same time, it draws on the principles of composition typical of series, where all plotlines come to a conclusion within one episode, without changing the axiological status of the characters involved. The status quo of the characters seldom remains unchanged in neo-serials (although this is not a rule) as the so-called character arc is developed.[8] The events of single-episode plotlines are not indifferent to the characters since, as a result of what has happened, a character may exhibit different behaviour in subsequent episodes, thereby violating the governing principle of episodic series.

To explain the difference between overarching events – which substantially contribute to plot development – and episodic events, it may be worthwhile to draw on Sarah Kozloff's analyses of serials. Admittedly, her analytical methodology (after Seymour Chatman) employs the notions of kernel and satellite events in a given episode, but the scholar aptly characterises the differences in serial structures. In an episode, satellite events are irrelevant to the main plot but

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[8] So-called character transformation. The totality of character's behaviours that reveal their internal (characterological) transformation under the influence of events in the film.

may indirectly influence the main axis of the story by, for example, adding to the psychological portrayal of a character. At the same time, kernel events include situations and conflicts relating to the main narrative axis (Kozloff, 1998, p. 73). In this approach, an episodic plotline will be distinguished from subplots by its apparent independence from the main plot (it does not affect its events). It is possible (though not necessary) for the protagonists to have their status modified (through character development or additional information which elucidates a particular character) while maintaining a self-contained structure. Thus, besides a strictly entertaining role in a given episode, the episodic plotline has a dramatic function as well.

The episodic plotline is characterised by:
• presentation of a story unrelated (or related to a minor extent) to the main plot,
• focus on random characters,
• duration limited to one episode (with the assumption that the introductory or concluding scene may occur – respectively – in an earlier or subsequent episode, but the actual dramatic "enactment" takes place within a single episode),
• in terms of screen time, this is the shortest type of plotline (sometimes presented in the course of only two or three scenes).

As observed at the outset, the processuality and hybridisation of plot structures in serials require entirely new terms to describe such narrative arrangements. Considering the singular nature of serials, the term "catalytic plotline" is proposed, which denotes events that successively unfold around an incident that triggers the action within the main plot. In film narratology (especially in the context of classical narrative), there is the concept of a complicating action event (Bordwell, 1985, p. 35), i.e. an event that initiates the further development of the main plot events. Ostaszewski (2019, p. 91) notes as follows: "The event introduces a problem which constitutes the theme of the film, and it is that problem which the protagonist will have to confront", and goes on to explain that "the complication may take the straightforward form of an event, such as direct action or conversation"; alternatively, "the complication may also assume a complex form" (Ostaszewski, 2019, pp. 91–92). Whichever model is used, the events that initiate the action proper are condensed into one dramatic line, most often as part of the main plot. In continuing series, the creators often develop that single event into an independently functioning plot (usually a subplot). The initiating event, which would be an essential part of the main narrative line in feature films, given their limited duration, tends to be expanded in neo-serials into a highly correlated, albeit separate, independently functioning plotline with a distinctive narrative.

For instance, in *Breaking Bad*, the main protagonist, Walter White (Bryan Cranston), learns that he has cancer, which induces him to embark on drug production and trafficking. However, the creators do not confine themselves to that one-off event (finding out about the disease), linking it with other events related to the course of Walter's illness, thus establishing a consistent, causal

chain of events that make up an autonomous plotline. Another instance of the catalytic plotline involving a similar narrative strategy may be seen in *Boss* (Starz, 2011–2012), which follows the professional and private life of Chicago Mayor Tom Kane (Kelsey Grammer). Despite being diagnosed with a serious condition, the politician does not abandon his political crusade to completely dominate those around him. The illness plotline – an actual subplot continuing throughout the series – has a "catalytic" function. Individual events of that plotline explain a number of the protagonist's behaviours, even amplifying his actions due to the progression of his mental illness.

Thus, in the hierarchy of plots, the catalytic plotline bears the hallmarks of a subplot; however, it is distinguished by the specific function it performs in the overall plot of the serial. It is constructed from a sequence of events that represent an extension of the situation which initiated the story. While a single event produces an effect (usually the first turning point) – the protagonist decides to take action – the catalytic plotline reinforces the protagonist's resolve to intensify the action taken at the first turning point. The suggested term "catalytic plotline" is indicative of a peculiar structure in a serial and may thus serve as a tool for diagnosing the formal aspects of a particular serialised production.

Consequently, the catalytic plotline is characterised by:
• close correlation with the main plot,
• catalytic function with respect to the events of the main plot,
• events revolving around the protagonists (primary characters),
• in most cases pursued throughout the series.

Naturally, using such a narrative solution in continuing series is not a universal creative practice (one of the better-known shows produced by Netflix, i.e. *House of Cards*, does not feature a catalytic plotline, only a single event woven into the main plot).

The issues discussed in this study concerning the definitions and hierarchy of the plotlines used by the creators of contemporary serials may seem marginal compared with other aspects of narration. Undeniably, cultural transformation, a different model of distribution and reception of serialised content, resulted in changes to the individual compositional elements of a story. Contemporary serial narratives are constructed through a network of plotlines which, in their totality, make up varied narrative arrangements. Moreover, one readily notices a process of integrating individual plots into a complementary whole, or as Jane Feuer (2011, p. 118) puts it, of "juxtaposing, interweaving and orchestrating the plot threads together in a quasi-musical fashion." Redefining and introducing new scholarly terms that highlight the symptomatic nature of certain plotlines will translate into more detailed distinctions in the study of particular serialised productions. Having identified diverse multi-plotline arrangements, it may be possible to determine the still unspecified genre characteristics of neo-serials. The above inquiry should, of course, be updated as creative practices change. Despite high production costs, interactive narrative continues to be developed, and a new modality of storytelling has appeared on the horizon, namely several-minute-long episodes of online series, in whose case the definitions formulated to date may prove inaccurate.

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S u m m a r y

The paper is concerned with the terminology of plotlines in serial narratives. Regarding the formal factors that have undergone considerable transformations, media scholars mention a particular type of composition that is based on a multi-plotline arrangement and is characterised by the dominance of continuing plotlines. The evolving storytelling paradigm entails the need to redefine some of the descriptive terms, as well as introduce new designations. The term "plot" is explained in the context of literary studies, film studies and the industry nomenclature associated with the production of serials. The author also proposes adopting a new scholarly term, i.e. the "catalytic plotline".

**Wątek główny, równoległy czy epizodyczny? Storyline A, B czy C?
Kwestia wątków w narracji serialowej**

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Artykuł dotyczy nazewnictwa wątków w narracji serialowej. Wśród czynników formalnych, które uległy znaczącym przemianom, medioznawcy wymieniają specyficzny rodzaj kompozycji w rozkładzie wielowątkowym, charakteryzowany dominantą wątków kontynuowanych. Ewoluujący paradygmat opowiadania implikuje konieczność redefiniowania niektórych z pojęć opisowych, jak również wprowadzenia nowego nazewnictwa. Termin „wątek" wyjaśniono w kontekście badań literackich, filmowych i branżowego nazewnictwa związanego z produkcją seriali. Autor artykułu zgłasza propozycję wprowadzenia nowego terminu badawczego: wątek katalizujący.